Race-Related Differences in Self-Reported and Validated Turnout in 1986

Paul R. Abramson
Michigan State University

William Claggett
Florida State University

Black Americans are less likely to participate in politics than white Americans are, but many students of political participation have argued that these differences result solely from racial differences in socioeconomic status. We have questioned these conclusions by analyzing the 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, and 1984 vote validation studies in which local registration and voting records were used to measure electoral participation. When participation was measured by the vote validation studies, racial differences were reduced after controls were introduced, but whites were still more likely to vote than blacks. The 1986 Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies (SRC-CPS) vote validation study is used to update our findings. The results are consistent with our previous analyses. The 1986 study does not confirm the finding of U.S. Census Bureau survey that young blacks were more likely to vote than young whites. However, our analyses do support the basic finding of the bureau that racial differences in electoral participation have declined.

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1987), the 1986 congressional elections continued a 22-year-long trend toward reducing racial differences in electoral participation. The massive post-election survey conducted by the bureau found that 47.0% of the whites reported voting, whereas 43.2% of the blacks said that they voted.[1] In 1966, when midterm turnout was first studied, whites were 15.3 percentage points more likely to report voting than blacks. In both 1970 and 1974, whites were 12.5 percentage points more likely to report voting, but the difference dropped to 10.1 points in 1978 and to 6.9 points in 1982. The 3.8 percentage point racial difference in reported turnout in 1986

[1] The typical Census Bureau turnout survey is based upon more than 50,000 households, and voting and registration information is gathered for more than 100,000 individuals.

was not only smaller than that recorded in the five previous midterm surveys, but was also smaller than racial differences in any of the six presidential surveys conducted since the Bureau began its voter participation studies in 1964.

Since the behavior of the young may provide clues about the future, one of the bureau's findings was particularly encouraging for Americans who hope to see racial differences in turnout eliminated. Among respondents below the age of 25, blacks were somewhat more likely to vote than whites. Among whites between the ages of 18 and 24, 21.6% reported voting, whereas among young blacks 25.1% said that they voted. Among the broadly defined group between the ages of 18 and 44, racial differences in turnout were negligible. Among whites of this age, 36.9% reported voting, whereas among blacks, 36.4% said that they voted. The bureau considered the finding that young blacks were more likely to vote than young whites to be among the "highlights" of the 1986 survey, and concluded that "Young Blacks 18 to 24 years old . . . moved ahead of Whites in 1986 both in voter turnout . . . and in registration" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987, p. 2).

The tendency of young blacks to vote more than young whites was clearly newsworthy. According to Dale Russakoff, writing in the *Washington Post* (October 7, 1987), "Political analysts said the study confirms a trend toward stronger participation by black voters, youths in particular." This increased turnout could lead to greater black influence, and this influence was being demonstrated in "the near-solid opposition of southern Democrats to the Supreme Court nomination of Robert H. Bork." According to Republican strategist Lee Atwater, the relatively high turnout among black youths was "a tribute to Jesse Jackson. . . . These are voters he's been targeting for the last four to five years, and I didn't realize how effective he apparently was" (quoted in Russakoff, 1987).

Students of political participation are by now well aware that there are serious problems in relying upon reported turnout as a measure of electoral participation. These problems are compounded when whites and blacks are compared, since blacks appear to be more likely to overreport voting than whites. Failure to recognize this bias can lead to questionable conclusions. For example, many students of political participation have argued that the lower participation of blacks results solely from their lower socioeconomic status. Thus, although blacks were less likely to participate in politics than whites, controls for socioeconomic status, along with controls for region, could eliminate or even reverse racial differences in political participation.

In two recent studies (Abramson and Claggett, 1984; 1986), we used surveys conducted in 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, and 1984 by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan to question this conclusion.[2] We compared the results using the respondents'

[2] The census survey consistently registers lower levels of reported turnout than the SRC-CPS surveys. This difference results partly from the different sampling frames used by the Census Bureau and the SRC. The census surveys are based upon the noninstitutionalized voting-age pop-

reports about their electoral participation with results using individual-level measures of participation based upon direct checks of local registration and voting records—the "vote validation studies." In 1964, 1976, and 1980 racial differences in reported turnout were eliminated or reversed when joint controls were introduced for region and level of education, and racial differences were reduced substantially in 1984.[3] In the 1978 midterm study, joint controls reduced, but failed to eliminate, racial differences in reported electoral participation. On balance, the conventional wisdom was upheld when turnout was measured with self-reported participation.

Substantially different results obtained when the vote validation variable was used to measure electoral participation. In all five surveys, racial differences in validated turnout were substantially greater than differences in reported turnout. Except for the 1980 survey, racial differences remained statistically significant—even when joint controls for region and level of education were introduced. Moreover, even in 1980 whites were between two and seven percentage points more likely to vote than blacks even after joint controls were introduced. In the 1978 midterm study, zero-order differences in validated turnout were greater than in any of the presidential election surveys, and blacks were between fourteen and eighteen points less likely to vote than whites even after joint controls were introduced.

The likelihood that controls will eliminate racial differences in turnout is largely a function of the size of the zero-order differences. The census results suggest that racial differences were small, substantially increasing the chances that controls will eliminate turnout differences between whites and blacks.

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ulation, whereas the SRC-CPS surveys are based upon the noninstitutionalized politically eligible population. In addition, the Census Bureau is more successful than the SRC in sampling Americans with low socioeconomic status.

The census surveys are based upon interviews conducted about two weeks after the election. During presidential years, the SRC surveys probably exaggerate turnout by conducting a pre-election interview that may stimulate some respondents to vote (see Anderson, Silver, and Abramson, 1988). This problem does not arise with the SRC midterm studies since they rely only upon a postelection interview.

[3] Our analysis of the 1984 results was based upon the vote validation data released for analysis in the summer of 1985. In the final release version of these data, which were released in the winter of 1986, some respondents who had originally been classified as not ascertained on the vote validation variable were reclassified as validated nonvoters. Following classification procedures employed by Anderson, Silver, and Abramson (1988) we found that both white and black validated turnout were three points lower than they were with the earlier version of the data. Some of our arguments about the relatively low level of overreporting in 1984 are not supported by the final version of the 1984 vote validation study. However, in the final release version of the data, as in the earlier version, blacks were more likely to overreport voting than whites. White validated turnout was 18.2 percentage points higher than black validated turnout, a result identical with our earlier analysis. We have repeated both our algebraic standardization procedures and our categorical regression techniques with the final version of the vote validation study, and our substantive arguments about controls failing to eliminate racial differences in validated turnout are clearly supported.

Indeed, by working directly with the published Census Bureau results, one can demonstrate that in 1986 controls for level of education substantially reduced the already small racial differences in electoral participation. Assuming blacks had the same levels of formal education as whites, reported turnout among blacks would have been 46.3%—less than a single percentage point below white turnout.[4]

Given known racial biases in reported turnout, however, it is important to determine the size of racial differences when they are measured without relying upon respondents' reports. Therefore, this note has four goals. First, we want to determine whether racial differences in 1986 are actually minimal when measured by actual checks of voting and registration records. Second, we want to see whether racial differences in midterm turnout have been reduced when turnout is measured by the vote validation studies. Third, we want to determine whether controls eliminate racial differences in participation in 1986 when the vote validation measure is employed. Lastly, we want to determine whether the widely reported finding that young blacks voted more often than young whites is supported when one relies upon actual checks of the registration and voting records.

In 1986, as in all five previous vote validation studies, blacks were more likely to overreport voting than whites.[5] Among whites who said they voted ($N = 909$), 13.0% did not vote according to checks of local registration and voting records; among blacks who said they voted ($N = 151$), 31.8% did not vote according to these checks. However, as Anderson and Silver (1986) note (see also Silver, Anderson, and Abramson, 1986), the percentage of overreporting is partly a function of a group's turnout. Other things being equal, the percentage of reported voters who do not vote will be higher among low turnout groups. As they argue, validated nonvoters constitute the "population at risk" of overreporting. But in 1986, black validated nonvoters were significantly ($p < .001$) more likely to overreport voting than white validated nonvoters. Among the 920 white validated nonvoters, 12.8% claimed to have voted; among the 202 black validated nonvoters, 23.8% said that they voted.

The 1986 vote validation survey therefore replicates the basic finding of all five previous studies: the relationship of race to turnout is higher when electoral participation is measured by the vote validation study. Figure 1 sum-

[4] This estimate is based upon an algebraic standardization procedure in which we assume that participation for each educational level of blacks was the same as the observed level in the census survey, but assume that the educational levels of blacks were the same as educational levels among whites.

[5] Our analysis is based upon ICPSR study 8678, which is the second ICPSR edition of the data. We have been assured by the ICPSR that this data set contains the final version of the 1986 vote validation study. To measure validated turnout we employed variable 802, which is the summary variable for the vote validation study. We classified respondents coded 11 and 33 as validated voters; those coded 21, 22, 24, 31, and 32 were classified as validated nonvoters. All other categories were classified as not ascertained.

FIGURE 1

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED
BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDIES:
1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, AND 1986
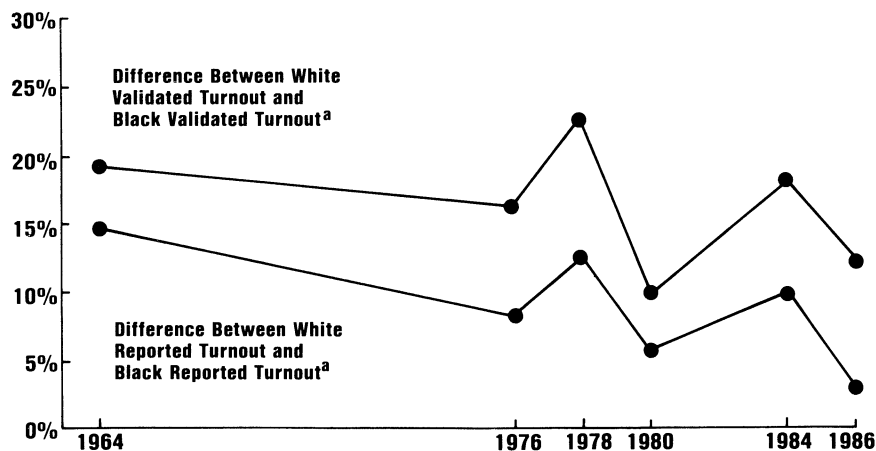
Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: For details about the 1964, 1976, 1978, and 1980 results, see Abramson and Claggett (1984) and for details about the 1984 results, see Abramson and Claggett (1986), and note 3 of this research note.

[a]White turnout minus black turnout.

marizes our previous findings, and also presents racial differences in reported and validated turnout for the 1986 survey. When turnout is measured according to the respondents' reports in 1986, whites are only 3.0 percentage points more likely to vote than blacks—a statistically insignificant difference. But when turnout is measured by the vote validation variable, whites are 12.0 percentage points more likely to vote than blacks. Regardless of which measure of turnout is used, racial differences are substantially lower than they were in 1978—the only other midterm election in which a vote validation study was conducted. In that survey, whites were 12.4 percentage points more likely to say they voted than blacks were, and they were 22.4% more likely to vote according to the validation study. Given the much smaller racial differences in the 1986 SRC survey, the prospect that controls will eliminate racial differences seemed substantially greater.

As with our earlier analyses, we determined the extent to which racial differences were reduced by controlling for the fact that blacks were more likely than whites to live in the South and to have lower levels of formal education. Table 1 of this note updates the results of tables 1 and 2 of our article (and

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE WHO SAID THEY VOTED AND PERCENTAGE WHO VOTED ACCORDING TO VOTE VALIDATION STUDY, BY RACE, REGION, AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION: 1986

South

Method of Measurement	Race	8 Grades or Less	Some High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Total for South
Respondents' Report	White	39 (49)	20 (60)	38 (149)	46 (97)	72 (71)	43.0 (426)
	Black	58 (31)	34 (35)	43 (54)	52 (27)	73 (15)	48.1 (162)
Vote Validation Study	White	31 (49)	15 (59)	29 (139)	39 (87)	65 (68)	35.3 (402)
	Black	41 (29)	26 (34)	20 (50)	24 (25)	60 (15)	30.1 (153)

Outside the South

Method of Measurement	Race	8 Grades or Less	Some High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Total for Outside the South	Total for Nation
Respondents' Report	White	39 (94)	39 (134)	52 (488)	59 (333)	73 (309)	56.5 (1358)	53.3 (1784)
	Black	71 (17)	32 (25)	47 (60)	62 (34)	65 (20)	52.6 (156)	50.3 (318)
Vote Validation Study	White	34 (91)	31 (129)	47 (473)	50 (313)	66 (291)	49.7 (1297)	46.3 (1699)
	Black	56 (16)	32 (25)	31 (58)	41 (32)	53 (19)	38.7 (150)	34.3 (303)

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.
Note: Numbers in parentheses are the totals upon which percentages are based.

table 1 of our earlier note). Within each region, the first two rows present reported turnout by race and level of education, whereas the bottom two rows show the percentage who voted when turnout is measured by the vote validation study. Among both races, southerners are less likely to vote than respondents outside the South. Southern whites are 13.5 points less likely to say they voted than nonsouthern whites, whereas southern blacks are 4.5 points less likely to say they voted than nonsouthern blacks. According to the vote validation results, southern whites are 14.4 points less likely to vote than nonsouthern whites, whereas southern blacks are 8.6 points less likely to vote than nonsouthern blacks.

   As can be seen by reading across the rows, among whites there is a clear positive relationship between level of education and turnout, regardless of which measure of electoral participation is employed. Among blacks there is also a positive but weak relationship between level of education and both measures of participation. This relationship is weak mainly because both reported and validated turnout are high among blacks with very low levels of education. Indeed, in both regions blacks with low levels of education are more likely to vote than whites with low levels of education.[6] This result is consistent with the Census Bureau finding that blacks with very low levels of formal education were more likely to report voting than whites with very low educational levels.

   Following our earlier analyses, we employed two different methods to determine the extent to which controls for region and level of education reduce the zero-order difference between race and turnout. Table 2 updates table 3 and table 4 of our article (and table 2 of our earlier note) by showing the effects of an algebraic standardization procedure in reducing these differences. Table 3 updates results from table 5 and table 6 of our original article (and table 3 of our earlier note) by showing the effects of these controls in reducing racial differences when categorical regression equations are used to estimate their impact. We present the results of four equations. Equation 1 presents the zero-order difference between white turnout and black turnout, equation 2 presents the results with region introduced as a control, equation 3 presents the results controlling for level of education, while equation 4 presents the results controlling simultaneously for both region and level of education.

   Turning to our algebraic standardization results, we see that controls for region reduce 40% of the zero-order difference between white reported turnout and black reported turnout. If controls are introduced for level of education, 90% of the zero-order differences are removed. When joint controls for region

[6] This relationship is significant, however, only when reported electoral participation is used to measure turnout. We compared blacks and whites who had not graduated from high school. Racial differences are significant outside the South ($p < .05$) and in the nation as a whole ($p < .01$). When the vote validation measure is used to measure turnout, the tendency of blacks with low levels of education to vote more than whites with low educational levels fails to attain conventional levels of significance.

TABLE 2

ACTUAL AND STANDARDIZED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK
TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE
VALIDATION STUDY: 1986

Method of Measurement	Equation Number	Controls Introduced for Following Variables	White Turnout	Black Turnout	Difference between White Turnout and Black Turnout[a]	Percentage of Racial Differences Accounted for by Standardization Procedures
Respondents' Reports	(1)	None	53.3	50.3	3.0	—
	(2)	Region		51.5	1.8	40
	(3)	Level of Education		53.0	0.3	90
	(4)	Region and Level of Education		53.7	−0.4	113
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	46.3	34.3	12.0	—
	(2)	Region		36.7	9.6	20
	(3)	Level of Education		36.0	10.3	14
	(4)	Region and Level of Education		37.9	8.4	30

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1.

[a]White turnout minus black turnout.

and level of education are introduced, blacks are more likely to report voting than whites. In 1978, whites were still somewhat more likely to report voting (by 4.6 percentage points) even after joint controls for region and level of education were introduced.

When the vote validation variable is used to measure turnout in 1986, zero-order differences are substantially greater, and, although they are reduced by controls, whites remain more likely to vote than blacks. Even when joint controls are introduced for region and level of education, whites are 8.4 points more likely to vote than blacks. In 1978, whites were 14.2 points more likely to vote than blacks even after joint controls were introduced.

Our alternative method, which uses categorical regression equations to test for the effects of controls, yields similar results. The categorical regression

TABLE 3

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY
RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDY AS
ESTIMATED BY CATEGORICAL REGRESSION EQUATIONS (ZERO-ORDER
DIFFERENCES AND DIFFERENCES WITH CONTROLS): 1986

Method of Measurement	Equation Number	Controls Introduced for Following Variables	Difference between White Turnout and Black Turnout[a]	Percentage of Racial Differences Accounted for by Controls
Respondents' Reports	(1)	None	.030	—
	(2)	Region	−.002	107
	(3)	Level of Education	−.014	147
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	−.042	240
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	.120**	—
	(2)	Region	.082**	32
	(3)	Level of Education	.084**	30
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	.054	55

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: Variables coded as follows: Race, -1 = black, 1 = white; Region, -1 = outside the South, 1 = South. Level of Education was treated as a series of four dummy variables with each of the four lower levels of education compared with college graduates. For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1.

[a]White turnout minus black turnout. This difference is derived by doubling the size of the estimated regression coefficient since with our dummy variable procedures this coefficient is equal to half the distance between white and black turnout.

*Significant at .05 (based on X^2s).

**Significant at .01 (based on X^2s).

vantage in reported turnout (turnout in table 3 is presented in terms of proportions) into a 4.2 percentage point black advantage. However, neither of these racial differences is statistically significant. In contrast, in 1978 a strong and significant 12.3 point white advantage was reduced to a 6.4 point advantage, and this latter difference was not statistically significant.

When turnout was measured with the vote validation variable in 1986, joint controls reduce by more than half the original zero-order difference. But black turnout was still lower than white turnout, although the 5.4 point white ad-

turnout was still lower than white turnout, although the 5.4 point white ad-
vantage falls just short of statistical significance ($p < .07$). In 1978, on the other
hand, joint controls reduced the original zero-order racial difference from
22.4 points to 17.7 points, a difference still significant at the .01 level.

Clearly, the vote validation studies confirm the basic finding that racial dif-
ferences in turnout have been declining. However, the 1986 validation study
suggests that blacks are still somewhat less likely to vote than comparably sit-
uated whites. But what of the widely reported finding that young blacks are
more likely to vote than young whites? Here we must certainly tread with cau-
tion, since our N's are much smaller than those of the census survey. We found
that among whites between the ages of 18 and 24 ($N = 207$), 22.7% reported
voting; among young blacks ($N = 46$), 23.9% said that they voted. But once
turnout is measured by the vote validation study, young whites are more
likely to vote than young blacks. Among young whites ($N = 199$), 19.1%
voted; among young blacks ($N = 44$), 13.6% did. Neither of these differences,
however, is statistically significant.[7] When broader age categories are used,
it becomes clear that conclusions about age may be affected by relying upon
self-reported turnout. Among whites between the ages of 18 and 44 ($N = 1,062$), 42.7% said they voted; among blacks of this age ($N = 188$), 38.8% did.
Whites were more likely to say they voted than blacks, but the racial differ-
ence is not significant. Strikingly different results are obtained when turnout
is measured by the vote validation variable. Among whites between the ages
of 18 and 44 ($N = 1,006$), 35.6% voted; among blacks of this age ($N = 179$),
only 22.3% did. This 13.3 percentage point difference is unlikely to have oc-
curred by chance ($p < .01$).

Given the small number of cases, it is not practical to introduce controls
among the 18- to 24-year-olds, but we did attempt to determine whether con-
trols for region and level of education would reduce or eliminate racial dif-
ferences in validated turnout among 18- to 44-year-olds. Blacks of this age
were more likely to live in the South than whites, and they were more likely
to have lower levels of formal education. Controls for region do not reverse
the tendency of 18 to 44-year-old blacks to vote less than whites of this age.
Outside the South, whites are 12.8 percentage points more likely to vote than
blacks ($p < .05$);[8] in the South, they are 6.5 points more likely to vote (NS).[9]
When controls are introduced for level of education, however, the tendency

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[7] We also employed our analyses of age differences in turnout to determine the extent to which
the tendency of blacks to vote less than whites results from their youth. Unfortunately, there
was only a weak relationship between age and race in the 1986 SRC survey. As a result, controls
for age have little effect in reducing racial differences in turnout. According to our algebraic stan-
dardization procedures, only about 5% of the difference between black and white validated turn-
out results from the tendency of blacks to be younger than whites.

[8] Among whites ($N = 760$), 38.9% voted, whereas among blacks ($N = 88$), 26.1% voted.

[9] Among whites ($N = 246$), 25.2% voted, whereas among blacks ($N = 91$), 18.7% voted.

for whites to vote more than blacks is eliminated among respondents who have not graduated from high school. Blacks who have not graduated from high school are 1.2 percentage points more likely to vote than whites, a difference that is obviously insignificant.[10] But among high school graduates (including respondents with higher levels of education) racial differences persist among the 18- to 44-year-olds. White high school graduates are 13.3 points more likely to vote than black high school graduates—a difference significant at the .01 level.[11] Given the small number of cases, it was not practical to introduce joint controls for region and level of education.

The 1986 validation study, especially in conjunction with the five previous vote validation studies, strongly suggests that relative levels of black turnout are inflated when analysts rely solely upon respondents' self-reports. Thus, despite some year-to-year differences, the overall results from the six valida-tion studies show considerable continuity. On the other hand, although we have only two data points, the validation studies suggest that racial differences in midterm turnout have declined, a finding consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau survey results. But the validation study does not support the U.S. Census Bureau's conclusion that young blacks are more likely to vote than young whites. We would be reluctant to accept this conclusion unless it were confirmed by additional evidence that did not rely solely upon respondents' reports.

Despite the gradual decline in racial differences in turnout, blacks were still less likely to vote than comparably situated whites. There is one exception to this generalization, however. Blacks with very low levels of formal educa-tion may be more likely to vote than whites with very low levels of education. These differences are clearly revealed in table 1. The tendency of blacks to vote more than whites appears to be particularly marked in the South, since this relationship is found among both of the two lower educational categories and with both measures of electoral participation. Given the small number of cases, however, this reversal does not attain statistical significance. The census survey results reveal that blacks with lower levels of formal education are somewhat more likely to report voting than whites with low levels of ed-ucation, but the published census results do not present controls for region. Students of turnout should pay particular attention to future survey results to determine whether the tendency of blacks with low levels of education to participate more than poorly educated whites persists. If it does, the reversal will pose an interesting puzzle that may be addressed both with future val-idation studies as well as reanalyses of the Census Bureau surveys.

[10] Among whites ($N = 122$), 7.4% voted, whereas among blacks ($N = 35$), 8.6% voted.
[11] Among whites ($N = 878$), 39.5% voted, whereas among blacks ($N = 141$), 26.2% voted.

408   Paul R. Abramson and William Claggett

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Paul R. Abramson is professor of political science, Michigan State Univer-
sity, East Lansing, MI 48824–1032.

William Claggett is associate professor of political science, Florida State
University, Tallahassee, FL 32306–2049.